

All the Good Things You Are

Erin McCoy

This short story is told from the perspective of a young man who has survived his brother's (a Marine) death in Iraq, and how he is coming to terms with war and remembering his brother who is trapped in time as a perpetual adolescent. The subject of the story, along with its narrative structure (it is told in both emails from the elder brother and present-day narration from the surviving younger brother) speaks to the themes of media and memory central to understanding the human costs of war in its contemporary moment.

When Mrs. Rogers dropped me off from soccer practice – two weeks ago tomorrow – I wasn't thinking about Dave. I had to clean up from practice and start on my homework. My brother is a subject that I avoid, somewhat. It's hard not to think about him, but whenever I do my stomach twists and I feel sick.

But when I got home, there were all these cars in the driveway. I recognized my mom and step dad's cars and my dad's, but there was a government car, shiny blue and out of place among our old clunkers. I wish I could say that my first thought was "Dave's home!" but it wasn't. My throat went dry, and I knew, before I even had my hand on the door, that Dave was dead.

From: Davester1220@aol.com

To: tjocon@perigee.net

Date: 23 April 2006

finally here!!!!!!!!!!!!!! shit, we started out in Ft. bragg and then we went to Juno then to Ireland than Kuwait (the desert with a mcdonalds) and now we're here. used to be a big warehouse, so picture rows and rows of beds going on far as you can see. and all we do is train train train. did you know that you have to wrap the guns up in a lady's

pantyhose leg? it keeps the sand out. can't tell you exactly where i am, but i can say i'm in the Sunni triangle. bet you know where that is exactly, dumbass big brain:)

i got a tattoo in ft. bragg before we left, but don't tell mom. me and gray and steve got the semper fi on a bulldog. are you jealous that i got one before you? you can go and get one with my name and a heart, ha. we're all really tired. i think i've had ten hours of sleep total in the last three days. my buddy gray has got big circles under his eyes but he still wakes up and does pushups and shit. we went out on a patrol today and it smells like shit everywhere - and there are run-over donkeys and goats all over the road. i saw this big blue tent today, with cars parked outside and a satellite dish. my platoon sgt said it was somebody's house. we are basically just in the middle of the desert. tell mom i'm sending her a donkey... oh wait, she's already got Ray ha ha

My mom was sitting next to my dad, which was rare to see. My step dad, Ray, had his hands on Mom's shoulders. He looked away when I came into the room, and my mom started crying. Two men in a uniform stood in front of the fireplace, and the younger one was turning his hat around in his hands.

My dad got up like he was leaving the room, but he stopped in front of me.
"Dave died. He was killed in action."

I remember that I opened my mouth and nothing came out. In my head I chanted *no no no no no...* Dave was going to come back. He was going to be okay, I had been practicing that speech in my head ever since he left. He was coming back.

My dad walked past me and into the bathroom. I heard him throw up. Mom cried, and Ray spoke in mutters to the military officers. I felt my stomach lurch, and I went to the kitchen. I sat in front of the phone for a second, then picked it up and held on to it for a while. The young military man came in. He stared at me for a second, looking at me like I'd just caught him taking something from our house. He had large ears and bulgy eyes, like a fish. He swallowed a couple of times.

"I'm sorry."

I nodded. He looked a couple years older than Dave. Maybe about 23 at the oldest. I held up the phone and he left.

But I didn't want to call anyone. Or I wanted to call anyone. Dave was about to turn twenty one, I'm about to be sixteen. We were going to drive across the country when he got back; we both would drive and he'd buy me beer. I hung up the phone and stared out the window. I don't know how long I stared at the raised flower beds before I realized that Dave helped Ray build them for Mom.

From: Davester1220@aol.com

To: tjocon@perigee.net

Date: 6 June 2006

hey brother! i only have a second, and opsec might be pissed that i tell you this, but i saw somebody fall out of the black hawk today - 30 fucking feet dude. knee's busted and concussion though, so that's good.

i haven't fallen out of any helicopters, but we hit our first choke point today. i freaked a little but i got over it. i got an rpk and gray's got an aka and we'll blow up some shit if it fucks with us, lemme tell ya little brother cause this is some hot stuff (gotta stay positive). at night everybody thinks they're a badass because that's when we hear all these shots at night. they burn stuff all the time too, so it's all spooky with fires burning. mostly rubber being burnt too, so it smells bad.

quit making fun of my typing. i'm very busy and important and i don't have time to write you pretty letters. you can't spell fer shit, btw.

Dave has been cremated and he is going to have a simple funeral service. He'll be buried in the Beaufort Memorial Cemetery. Dad wrote the obituary. Mom talked to Pastor Evans about the service, which is to be graveside and brief. No one wants to stand in a line in front of a photo of David, so we'll see some people at the funeral, and then anyone who wants to come over to Grandma's house afterwards is invited. There's a whole bunch of food. Ray arranged for a limousine to take Mom, Dad, me, and Grandma to the cemetery. Ray's going to ride with my Uncle James. That's the one I was named after. Dave was named after my Dad's brother, David Sean O'Connor. At Christmas they'd make a big joke of saying "what?" whenever anyone said the name David. I always thought it was stupid, 'because everyone knows that Dave never goes by David. He goes by Dave. Went by Dave.

From: Davester1220@aol.com

To: tjocon@perigee.net

Date: 31 July 2006

me and gray got to go to another fob today on convoy, and we went through tikrit. that's saddam's hometown. it looks like miami after an apocalypse.

there's a guy from the bbc here with us, and he let us use his international phone - we each got a turn. don't tell mom, but i called dad instead because i haven't spoken to him yet since i got here. he says he's doing good, but you ought to go eat with him again soon, i think he'd like to see you more. i told him that you were going out for tennis, and he was surprised. you said uncle david got a new boat, but dad says he got a canoe. i'm glad you aren't here in charge of anything, or we'd have water guns because you can't tell the difference between shit! both gray and steve called their girlfriends, and they were all wanting

to find some liquor after that. steve and his girl are engaged, so i think it's harder for him than gray. still, we found some beer and played darts. beats the hell outta patrol.

ha! maybe british guy will let me call you on your birthday, but if not HAPPY BIRTHDAY EARLY LITTLE BROTHER!!!!!!!!!!!!!! still not old enough to drive! that enough caps for you? ha

He hasn't been cremated, the fucking liars. Dad told me today that they're *sending* his ashes. That means there wasn't a body, there weren't remains. I asked Dad about that, and he said Sergeant Griffin, the older military guy who came to the house, told Mom and Ray that Dave was hit by an IED. He was on a convoy and he was hit by an improvised explosive device. No one in his truck made it.

"He didn't die alone," Dad told me.

From: Davester1220@aol.com

To: tjocon@perigee.net

Date: 18 August 2006

you made the team, yay! i'm happy for you, but that and soccer? you're going to be skinny or ripped, pick one. what's the first school you play? we've gotten to be friendly with our terp. he stays somewhere on the fob and whenever we patrol during the day, he comes with us and wears a full face stocking thing so no one knows he's helping the USA. we talked to some guy today and gray actually's picking up some words. anyway, we've just been going around on the light skinned on delta 2-2's. i got to man the mark 19 today and steve kept yelling at me making me freak out. we detonated a tow missile today and it blew a whole bunch of sand everywhere. i'm missing ice cream, so send me some. seriously, send me something. sudoko? not much to report, but british guy has this pocket battleship game and i'm kicking steve and gray's asses as much as i did yours. we practiced going into a sniper building today, and we were the fastest team in the drill practice. you oughta tell coach king that soccer and football skills are also valuable military skills. side step! come over here and herd some fucking donkeys with me. we got stopped by donkeys today. he-haw.

"These seats are so cushy," Grandma said to Dad.

"Yeah, they smell like leather," he replied.

Grandma is being positive and light all morning, like she's trying to make us feel better. Granddaddy was in World War II, and she was always proud of Dave's decision to

join the Marines. She was the one who made Mom okay with the tattoo, and she went to a few of his football games in high school. “Such a *strong* young man.” That’s what she said every time she saw him.

From: Davester1220@aol.com

To: tjocon@perigee.net

Date: 29 September 2006

last night the sandstorm made it HOTTER than it already is. you’d think the wind would make it colder. it’s hot as balls out here. i felt like ali baba last night, my head all wrapped in a black turban thing so i could keep sand out of my ears.

gray and steve say hi. they’re standing here making me hurry up because they want to email. i’m sorry you hurt your ankle and missed the meet, weakling. they think you need to wear forest gump braces on your legs, ha. they got in trouble for using british guy’s phone, but i didn’t! tell mom i want her to stop forwarding me things - i don’t have time to read them. but she sent some pictures from easter and that was cool.

hope everything’s good. thanks for sending me that book about boats. i do miss the water - it’s strange being in the desert when you live by the sea.

The driver cut around downtown and I caught a glimpse of the drawbridge. Dave liked watching, sometimes he’d even pull over and start hopping around, saying “Look at that cool shit, TJ. I love that shit. I bet you could design something like that... Except it’d break a lot.” Dave’s always been good at building things; he always took all the Legos and Tinker toys when we were kids. He always was good at building thing. Was. Past tense.

Grandma said something about how good it is that it’s overcast and cool for Beaufort in July. I started to feel panicky, so I took some deep breaths. Mom looked over at me. She looked at me different after she found out Dave died. Every time she looked at me, she’d cry. She’d apologize, *I’m sorry TJ I’m so sorry* and I’d hug her.

She was the one who, on the day we found out, finally reminded me that I was wearing my soccer stuff at dinner. I’d forgotten.

From: Davester1220@aol.com

To: tjocon@perigee.net

Date: 6 October 2006

it’s getting kind of hectic. there was a kill zone and one of our convoys got hit by an ied in a fucking car. we were looking for wires but we didn’t see them. sometimes they get detonated by cell phones. technology can be really damn nasty sometimes.

i’m tired. just wanted to reply to say hi.

When we got to the cemetery, I was seized with the urge to turn around and run the other direction. There were a lot of people there, high school friends of Dave's, people from church, some guys who worked with Dave at UPS, some of Dad's co-workers, Mom and Dad's friends, Ray's parents... I kept looking as we walked to some metal folding chairs that were covered in some velvety material. We were shaded by a little green tent, and all the mourners were kind of wrapped around us, but at a distance. It was hot, but there was a breeze. Still, I felt my shirt stick to me as I sat down between Mom and Dad. Mom put her hand on my back, and I wished she could have pushed me into a full sprint.

We were facing a table that had a flower arrangement on it and an American flag draped over one corner. A little flag stuck out of the flowers, a flag about the size of the ones you wave on the Fourth of July. And there was a photo of Dave. It was his military photo, and I hated it the instant I saw it.

From: Davester1220@aol.com

To: tjocon@perigee.net

Date: 12 November 2006

no, i didn't know there were cannibals in southern iraq.
not. i will always be older and wiser than you. accept it.
ha.

pissed off! we didn't get to rotate out tonight because we had to take british guy to another fob at 3am and then they decided it wasn't a good idea so we just went there to pick something up with him then turned around and came back. we're all getting tired.

The fucking military photo, the big one on "Dave's side" of Mom's table of pictures. I wanted to smash it. His face is blank in the picture, there's none of Dave's goofiness in it. He was a goofy fucker; he was always doing stupid stuff like standing behind a twig and shuffling back and forth, saying "I'm Birnam wood." He was just happy to understand a play, I'd tell him, and then he'd mess up my hair. He once painted his face blue on Halloween and spent the night yelling "FREEDOM," like Mel Gibson did in *Braveheart*, to the trick-or-treaters.

The picture of Dave does show his bulk. Dave was all muscle. Football, wrestling, weight-lifting, sailing, swimming. He never sat still.

I stared at the little wooden box that was on top of the flag. That was Dave now, a little wooden box. I thought *he's gonna be still now* and instantly felt like running again.

From: Davester1220@aol.com

To: tjocon@perigee.net

Date: 23 November 2006

flat flat flat sand sand sand
i hope you're doing better than i am

Pastor Evans kept saying things about how Dave "had lots of fires" inside him, and how all those fires produced a lasting wisp of smoke of Dave that would stay with us

forever. He didn't really know Dave, though. He's just saying the stuff Mom and Dad talked to him about.

All his talk about fire reminds me that Dave's *ashes* are in that box. I remember him telling me how IED's could be detonated in abandoned cars, trash, and even people. I remember him telling me about how little kids would wander around with IED's, and those Al-Qaeda fucks would blow up the little kids in order to blow up the soldiers. I started really thinking about that, staring at Dave's picture. I thought about one of those kids, a little skinny thing dressed in dirty clothes. Dark hair, dark eyes, and big eyelashes, like Abhi, who's on my soccer team. He's of Middle Eastern descent. I think about Abhi's white teeth, about Steven's big even teeth, and about a little kid strapped to an IED's teeth. I sit on the idea of the teeth propelling from the skull, the shards of bone and body incinerated. I think of their mouths moving and what they thought when they blew up, that split second where they realized...

I stopped myself. I don't know if that's what happened.

But I know Dave was blown up by some fucker, and I hate him and I hate his country and I hate my country and that military guy and then I feel bad for all that hate. I don't hate them, really, I just hate that I'll never see my brother again.

From: Davester1220@aol.com

To: tjocon@perigee.net

Date: 11 December 2006

so i take it you talked to mom? i'm not coming home for at least another three months. it's okay, don't get mad. well, i am mad but there's not much i can do. we're just going to make sure we all get out of here. gray was really upset. but he cheered up when we got to op-order into the city. we took a whole bunch of chinook parts out to another fob, and the guys over there gave us some slim jims that someone's mom sent. send me a slim jim, slim jim.

Pastor Evans clasped our hands and said thing to us, but I didn't really listen. As he walked away, I had the urge to run after him and pummel him to the ground. I wanted to beat someone down. I wanted to say:

"You don't fucking get to cry. He's my brother, *my* brother and he's dead because someone blew him up. Someone fucking blew him up and there's nothing left of him except this little box. There's no more fire, there's only *smoke* and that's not good enough for me. That's not enough. I don't want to never see my brother again. That's not what I want and nobody ever asked me. If it were up to me..." But I didn't.

From: Davester1220@aol.com

To: tjocon@perigee.net

Date: 22 December 2006

i hope you really did send those slim jims! i'd also like some chic-fil-a if you could, ha ha. i'm not going hungry, but there are some things i haven't eaten in a while that i

miss. we were all talking in the convoy the other day and gray wants a milkshake and steve wants kfc. we went through a town the other day where they dump their sewage and waste on the streets. imagine the litter box times a hundred, then add fires. people just walked around, and we heard gunfire. they just mind their own business, the kurds, as all their shit comes crumbling down around their ears. it's sad. the kids play in the blown up cars. there's still shit on the side of the road from desert storm. i guess unless we clean it up, they won't? we did kind of blow it up when we were here, i guess. some of got a little game of football going yesterday afternoon. i still got my arm, even though it's... well, i still got my arm and we had a good time. like i keep telling you, anything but combat patrol. the dod guys said they'd get us another phone out here so tell mom i'm going to call her real soon. to answer your question, no, i don't know why i'm here all the time, but it doesn't matter much when you're already here. we're just going to make sure we all get out. don't fool yourself, i'd much rather be back at ups than here. but i make the best of it, even though you start to feel a little unwanted. i know a lot of people here want us out, and a lot of people back home want us out. but i have to think we have to be here to help. i think we're helping, but i don't know if they want our help.

As the last people trickled away from the graveside, my Dad's friend Hank came up to us. Hank is from Texas, and while he's wiry and fair, he always has seemed *big* to me. He's always laughing, always talking in his *loud* Texas accent. He used to tell us funny stories on the boat, and he always has a good time.

Hank had on a suit and sunglasses. He came up to me and grabbed me into a bear hug, the force of it knocking the breath out of me. He nodded to me, and I saw that his face was red when he walked away. Hank fought in Desert Storm, I remembered. Hank lost friends, Hank hurt. He wasn't just crying for Dave, I thought, he's crying for everything these stupid wars did, all the people they took away, all the shit that people like my brother had to see and go through. But for what? So they could end up in small wooden boxes? Fuck that.

I stood there by the table, half-daring myself to touch the box. Someone had removed the Marine photo. I couldn't touch it. In my head, I kept repeating *my brother is in that box; all that's left of my brother is in that box*. And *why Dave?* I seethed and raged and felt myself cry. I wished I had a pair of sunglasses to hide behind like Hank. I didn't want anyone to see me cry. Dave died in battle, he died doing what he wanted to do, what he liked doing. He chose to go over there and fight. No one made him do it.

I wiped the tears away and got angry at Dave. Why did he choose to go there? If he knew he was walking into death why did he want to do it? Was it brave or stupid? I wouldn't do it.

Then my body welled up and I cried. I stood to the side of the box and felt a howl rising up in my chest. I wanted to see the photo again; I wanted to hear his voice again. I missed him so much at that moment that I thought I would collapse from the weight of it.

Dad walked over to me and hugged me, and Mom hugged me. We all cried, softly, but in their cocoon, I became silent.

From: Davester1220@aol.com

To: tjocon@perigee.net

Date: 27 January 2007

we're pulling security tomorrow. there's been a lot of problems around lately, people are getting restless and mad.

and by people, i mean us AND them. it's getting old, to be honest. not much sleep, sand everywhere, people walking around. donkeys. i miss the beach, i won't lie. but we all miss our families and our homes. it's nicer when you've got people with you, feeling the same as you. we're a big badass football team, y'know.

next time i see you, we're going to compare height. in that picture mom sent, you look taller than me. but i can still whoop you.

we need to take the battalion commander out this week because they're going to cut our power sometime soon. when i check my email then, i want to see something from you in the inbox. i need your sit rep, stat!

see ya

We left because the funeral people were ready to take down the tent to bury Dave. I could have dug the grave with a shovel, the box was so small. As we walked to the limo, I turned around a little and said, "See ya, Dave." The howl rose up in my throat again as I realized that I would never see Dave. Never again.

Erin McCoy graduated in May 2007 with her Master's of English from Clemson University. She has just finished a nine-month appointment with the University of South Carolina, Upstate, as an English instructor. Erin will be relocating from South Carolina this fall to attain her PhD in Humanities, where she will be studying the rhetoric of war-based lyrics and music.